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Secret Warnings About Wuhan Research Predated the Pandemic + More

The Defender's COVID NewsWatch provides a roundup of the latest headlines related to the SARS-CoV-2 virus, including its origins and COVID vaccines. The views expressed in the excerpts from other news sources do not necessarily reflect the views of The Defender.

By The Defender Staff

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Secret Warnings About Wuhan Research Predated the Pandemic

Vanity Fair reported:

In late October 2017, a U.S. health official from the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) arrived at the Wuhan Institute of Virology for a glimpse of an eagerly anticipated work in progress. The WIV, a leading research institute, was putting the finishing touches on China's first biosafety level 4 (BSL-4) laboratory. Operating with the highest safeguards, the lab would enable scientists to study some of the world's most lethal pathogens.

The project had support from Western governments seeking a more robust system to identify China's top scientists. France had helped design the facility. Canada, before long, would send virus samples. And in the U.S., NIAID was channeling grant dollars through an American organization called EcoHealth Alliance to help fund the WIV's cutting-edge coronavirus research.

In emails obtained by Vanity Fair, the NIAID official told her superiors what she'd gleaned from the technician who'd served as her guide. The lab, which was not yet fully operational, was struggling to develop certain expertise among its staff — a concern in a setting that had no tolerance for errors. "According to [the technician], being the first P4 [or BSL-4] lab in the country, they have to learn everything from errors," she wrote. They rely on those scientists who have worked in P4 labs outside China to train the other scientists how to operate."

She'd also learned something else "alarming" from the technician, she wrote. Researchers at the WIV intended to study Ebola, but Chinese government restrictions prevented them from importing samples. As a result, they were considering using a technique called reverse genetics to engineer Ebola in the lab. Anticipating that this information would set off alarm bells in the U.S., the official cautioned, "I don't want the information particularly using reverse genetics to create viruses to get out, which they would affect the ability for our future information gain," meaning it would impair the collaboration between NIAID and the WIV.

A six-month investigation by VF has found an almost decade-long trail of warnings issued by the Department of Energy to other government agencies, including the NIH, concerning the risk that U.S.-funded biology research could be misused by overseas partners. In mid-2018, an Energy Department official went so far as to issue a specific warning to NIAID about the obscure research the agency was funding at the WIV.

Anthony Fauci Will Testify Before Congress on COVID Origins and the U.S. Pandemic Response

Associated Press reported:

Anthony Fauci, former chief White House medical adviser, is expected to testify before Congress early next year as part of Republicans' yearslong investigation into the origins of COVID-19 and the U.S. response to the disease.

Fauci, who served as the nation's top infectious disease expert before retiring last year, will sit for transcribed interviews in early January and a public hearing at a later date. It will be his first appearance before the Republican-controlled House.

Rep. Brad Wenstrup, the GOP chairman of the Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Pandemic, who is also a longtime member of the House Intelligence Committee, has accused Fauci and U.S. officials of withholding key facts about its investigation into the coronavirus. Republicans on the committee last year issued a staff report arguing that there are "indications" that the virus may have been developed as a bioweapon inside China's Wuhan Institute of Virology.

That would contradict a U.S. intelligence community assessment released in unclassified form in August 2021 that said analysts do not believe the virus was a bioweapon, though it may have leaked in a lab accident.

COVID Vaccine Rates in the U.S. Are Slumping — and It Will Be a Challenge to Boost Them

CNBC reported:

Three years into the COVID-19 pandemic, few Americans are rolling up their sleeves to get a COVID vaccine. Only 15.7% of U.S. adults had received the newest COVID shots from Pfizer, Moderna and Novavax by Nov. 18, according to the latest data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Those jobs, some of which won approval in mid-September, are designed to target the Omicron subvariant XBB.1.5.

Some vaccine makers and health experts believe U.S. COVID vaccination rates in 2024 and beyond will likely look similar to the meager uptake of the latest round of shots this fall and winter.

Some experts hope a new, more convenient slate of shots targeting more than one respiratory virus could boost COVID vaccinations. But others are more skeptical about whether those combination jabs will make a difference.

New CDC Life Expectancy Data Shows Painfully Slow Rebound From COVID

The Washington Post reported:

Newly published data on life expectancy in the United States shows a partial rebound from the worst phase of the coronavirus pandemic, but drug overdoses, homicides and chronic illnesses such as heart disease continue to drive a long-term mortality crisis that has made this country an outlier in comparing more wealthy nations.

Life expectancy in 2022 rose more than a full year, to 77.5 years, in data released Wednesday by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. More than four-fifths of this positive jump was attributable to a drop in COVID-19 deaths.

But the rebound in 2022, which the CDC had anticipated after studying death rates, regained less than half the years lost to the pandemic, the federal health agency reported.

Steven Woolf, director emeritus of the Center on Society and Health at Virginia Commonwealth University, said many peer countries suffered smaller drops in life expectancy and rebounded more quickly from COVID-19's impact.

What To Know About Rapidly Spreading 'Pirola' COVID Variant BA.2.86 — and If Vaccines Offer Protection

Forbes reported:

Pirola, or BA.2.86, is the third most prevalent COVID strain in the U.S., and although there may be concerns the new monovalent vaccines — which protect against the XBB lineage that Pirola isn't a part of — don't offer protection against Pirola and its subvariants, drugmakers and the CDC are sure the vaccines offer a defense.

Pirola made up 8.8% of cases as of November 25, almost triple the number of cases the variant made up during the previous two-week period ending on November 11, when Pirola wasn't even one of the top five most prevalent variants, according to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

It's circulating the most in the Northeast, where it's the second most common variant in the region (1.3%) after HV.1. Pirola joined four other variants as "variants of interest" by the World Health Organization on Monday, a step up from its "variant under monitoring" label in August.

Some experts aren't so sure Pirola and its offspring — most notably FLiRT — will be very protected under the new vaccines. The authors of a biorxiv study wrote in a pre-publication comment, which has not been peer-reviewed, that the newer vaccines could spur the spread of the more recent Pirola viruses.

Suicide Rate Reached Record High in 2022 but Dropped Among Young People

The Washington Post reported:

Suicides among young Americans, whose mental health problems during the coronavirus pandemic reached crisis proportions, declined sharply in 2022, while rates for older groups — especially men — rose, according to data released by the government Wednesday.

The increase in suicides among people older than 35 was responsible for an overall 1% rise in the suicide rate to a record high of 14.3 per 100,000 people since 2021, according to provisional data released by the National Center for Health Statistics. The total number of suicides last year — 49,449 — rose by 3% and is expected to increase further when final data is available.

Men, who comprise the vast majority of suicides each year, saw a 2% jump in their total, to 39,255, resuming a long trend of increases after two years of small declines. Suicides among women rose 4%, to 10,194, but the rate remained roughly the same as it has been for decades.

People older than 75 posted the highest suicide rates since at least 1999.

Scoop: Biden Administration Sending Free COVID Tests to Schools

Axios reported:

The Biden administration for the first time will allow all schools to order free COVID-19 tests from the federal government ahead of the holidays, officials told Axios first.

Why it matters: The uptake of updated COVID vaccines has been sluggish, making other precautions like timely testing all the more critical as respiratory virus season heats up.

Details: The Administration for Strategic Preparedness and Response (ASPR), an agency within HHS, has a stockpile of hundreds of millions of COVID tests. It is teaming up with the Department of Education to allow school districts to order tests directly to distribute to families.

CDC Revamps Wastewater COVID Data Reporting

CIDRAP reported:

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recently unveiled new wastewater data tracking dashboard to make it easier to track local and national trends, even by variant. Wastewater tracking is one of the early indicators health officials use to gauge the activity of SARS-CoV-2 and other viruses.

On Twitter (X), Niall Brennan, MPP, senior adviser to the CDC's director, said the makeover was done over a 4-week period by a team informally called "Poo's Clues." He added that the goal was to reimagine how to present the data and improve the visualizations, which were previously underwhelming.

Amy Kirby, Ph.D., MPH, a microbiologist and epidemiologist who is part of the CDC team, pointed out on Twitter that the dashboard also includes mpox wastewater tracking.

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